

Trial opens against scientists for Italy quake

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Bernardo De Bernardinis, former vice chief of the the technical department of Italy's civil protection agency, right, and his lawyer Alfredo Biondi wait for the start of the trial in the Aquila Court, Italy, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2011. De Bernardinis in one of seven scientists and other experts who went on trial on manslaughter charges for allegedly failing to sufficiently warn residents before a devastating earthquake that killed more than 300 people in central Italy in 2009. The case is being closely watched by seismologists around the world who insist it's impossible to predict earthquakes and that no major temblor has ever been foretold. (AP Photo/Raniero Pizzi)

Seven scientists and other experts went on trial on manslaughter charges Tuesday for allegedly failing to sufficiently warn residents before a devastating earthquake that killed more than 300 people in central Italy in 2009.

The case is being closely watched by seismologists around the globe who insist it's impossible to predict earthquakes and dangerous to suggest

otherwise since seismologists will be discouraged from issuing any advice at all if they fear legal retaliation.

Last year, about 5,200 international researchers signed a petition supporting their Italian colleagues and the [Seismological Society of America](#) wrote to Italy's president expressing concern about what it called an unprecedented legal attack on science.

The seven defendants are accused of giving "inexact, incomplete and contradictory information" about whether smaller tremors felt by L'Aquila residents in the six months before the April 6, 2009 quake should have constituted grounds for a quake warning.

Prosecutors focused on a memo issued after a March 31, 2009 meeting of the Great Risks commission which was called because of mounting concerns about the months of [seismic activity](#) in the region.

According to the commission's memo - issued one week before the big quake - the experts concluded that it was "improbable" that there would be a major quake though it added that one couldn't be excluded.

Commission members also gave largely reassuring interviews to local media after the meeting which "persuaded the victims to stay at home," the indictment said.

The defendants' lawyers have insisted on their clients' innocence and stressed the impossibility of predicting quakes.

The 6.3-magnitude [temblor](#) killed 308 people in and around the medieval town of L'Aquila, which was largely reduced to rubble. Thousands of survivors lived in tent camps or temporary housing for months.

Tuesday's hearing was largely taken up with procedural details to inscribe the dozens of plaintiffs in the civil portion of the case, which will be heard alongside the criminal case. The plaintiffs are seeking some euro50 million (\$68.2 million) in damages, the ANSA news agency said.

"We are looking for justice, that's all," prosecutor Alfredo Rossini told reporters before the hearing, ANSA said.

The only one of the seven defendants in the chamber was Bernardo De Bernardinis, then-vice chief of the the technical department of Italy's civil protection agency. Another defendant, Enzo Boschi, then-head of the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, was not present.

The judge set the next hearing for Oct. 1.

In addition to the memo issued after the Great Risks commission, prosecutors focused on interviews De Bernardinis and other members of the commission gave to local media stressing the impossibility of predicting quakes and that even six months worth of low-magnitude temblors was not unusual in the highly seismic region.

In one now-infamous interview included in the prosecutors' case, De Bernardinis responded to a question about whether residents should just sit back and relax with a glass of wine.

"Absolutely, absolutely a Montepulciano doc," he responded, referring to a high-end red. "This seems important."

The indictments sent shudders throughout the international earthquake community, which responded to a call for support by Italy's geophysics institute with 5,200 signatories of professors, [seismologists](#), postdocs and researchers from New Zealand to Costa Rica, Japan to Martinique.

"Pursuing legal action against members of the seismological community after an earthquake is unprecedented and reflects a misunderstanding of the science of earthquakes," the president of the Seismological Society of America, Rick Aster wrote President Giorgio Napolitano.

Efforts should instead focus on working to better communicate earthquake risks to the public and boosting preparedness by retrofitting old and dangerous buildings, he said.

The American Geophysical Union warned that the trial would have the effect of harming efforts to understand natural disasters.

"Risk of litigation will discourage scientists and officials from advising their government or even working in the field of seismology and seismic risk assesment," the group said in a statement.

Many of the structures that collapsed in the 2009 quake were not properly built to standards for a quake-prone area like the central Apennine region of Abruzzo. Among the buildings which cracked and crumbled was L'Aquila's hospital, just as it was struggling to treat about 1,500 injured.

Nobody inside the hospital, which was built in the 1970s, was killed or injured in the [quake](#).

Manslaughter charges are not unusual in Italy for natural disasters such as quakes, but they have previously focused on violations of building codes in seismic regions.

In 2009, for example, an appeals court convicted five people in the 2002 quake-triggered collapse of a school in southern San Giuliano di Puglia that killed 27 children - including the town's entire first-grade class - and a teacher. Prosecutors had alleged that shoddy construction contributed

to the collapse of the school.

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